

HONEY BADGER PROJECT
Project File Document W-033
Black-backed Woodpecker Analysis
October 6, 2021

Habitat Relationships

Black-backed woodpeckers are primary cavity nesters that excavate their own cavities, most often in dead or dying trees. Black-backed woodpeckers are specialists in forests that have insect outbreaks from either wildfire, disease or other reasons. Black-backed woodpeckers are known to use three types of forested habitat: 1) post-fire areas that have burned within 1 to 6 years, 2) areas with extensive bark beetle outbreaks causing widespread tree mortality, and 3) a natural range of smaller disturbances scattered throughout the forest such as wind throw, ice damage or other occurrences that produce small patches of dead trees. These habitat conditions all provide habitat for the black-backed woodpecker's primary food source, woodborer beetles and larvae (Bonn et al. 2007). They nest primarily in dead trees, with an average 16" diameter at breast height (DBH) (Saab et al. 2002), though nests are also found in live trees within burned and beetle infested stands (Dixon and Saab 2000). Historically on the IPNF, mixed severity and stand-replacing fires produced new habitat annually in greater amounts than is presently produced under a fire suppression strategy (Zack and Morgan 1994). The black-backed woodpecker occurs mainly in coniferous forests, and it is drawn to burn areas where its primary food source is most abundant (Bonn et al. 2007). In the absence of burns, this woodpecker will forage in areas with diseased trees (Hillis et al. 2002), or small patches of dead trees resulting from disturbances such as wind throw and ice damage (Bonn et al. 2007). Black-backed woodpeckers tend to flourish in early post-fire (3-5 years) habitat (Hutto 1995). They are uncommon residents of coniferous forests year-round, naturally occurring at low population levels. Following fire or insect and disease outbreaks that increase populations of wood-boring insects, they experience local population increases and temporary range extensions. Fire suppression and post-fire logging reduce habitat for black-backed woodpeckers by reducing the availability of burned areas and snags (Hutto 1995). In addition to the presence of recently burned areas, key habitat factors for black-backed woodpeckers include the presence of snags and diseased trees for foraging.

Affected Environment

There is currently no high-quality habitat for black-backed woodpeckers in the project area. High quality habitat is defined as timbered stands with greater than 40% canopy cover (pre-fire) that have burned with moderate to high severities in large (approximately 200 acres) patch sizes (Russell et al. 2007). There have been no recent large wildfires and only two seasons of prescribed burns in the past 6 years in the project area. All of the prescribed burns were low-intensity fires below 200 acres. However, root diseases and the bark-inhabiting insects that can be associated with unhealthy trees are widespread in the project area. Over 80% of the Honey Badger project area, totaling over 40,200 acres, were designated as moderate root disease hazard (USDA 2018). Given the presence of these diseased and insect-infested trees and snags throughout the project area, it is expected that black-backed woodpeckers occur at low levels in the Honey Badger area. Prescribed burns for wildlife habitat improvement and fuels reduction are proposed for and could create up to roughly 5,460 acres of habitat for black-backed woodpeckers. The amount created will vary based on the severity of the burns and the acreage that actually gets burned. Eleven potential high-quality patches of approximately 200-500 acres would be created with the proposed action (Wildlife Project File W-011).

Rationale for Determination of Effects

The proposed action would increase the amount of suitable and potentially high-quality habitat for black-backed woodpeckers. The amount is not quantifiable due to the variable nature of prescribed fire, however conditions for black-backed woodpeckers are expected to improve from the existing condition. Most large snags in treatment units would be retained, and post-harvest slash treatment is expected to result in some incidental snag creation. Effects are expected to be relatively small, but positive and measurable.

Ongoing activities in the project area that likely will continue include firewood gathering, recreational activities, fire suppression and remaining fuels project activities authorized under more recently completed NEPA decisions. Activities that occur in black-backed woodpecker habitat have the potential to disturb this bird. As these activities are occurring and are expected to continue in the future, it is unlikely that this species would avoid these areas to a greater degree than what may be currently occurring. When these effects are combined with the temporary disturbance associated with the proposed Honey Badger Project, the cumulative impact on black-backed woodpecker is expected to be insignificant.

Consequently, the proposed action in conjunction with the past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions ***may impact*** black-backed woodpeckers ***or their habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.***

LIST OF REFERENCES CITED

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